THE MACHIAVELLIAN CONCEPTION OF FREEDOM AND THE BEGINNING OF A REPUBLICAN ORDER

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Abstract. In the essay "What is Freedom?", Hannah Arendt argues that freedom is the meaning, the "raison d'être" of politics and that political life from which it is absent is meaningless (Arendt 1977, 161). Hardly anyone denies the importance of freedom for any human or political society. It is no novelty either that freedom is a highly contested conception, the meaning of which is bound up with numerous controversies and disagreements. Yet, it is customary to distinguish between the "negative" and "positive" concepts of liberty in accordance with the dualistic framework presented by Isaiah Berlin in 1969. Notwithstanding its popularity, this categorization is at very least problematic. This paper elaborates on the Machiavellian understanding of freedom, which arguably cannot fit in Berlin's categorization. Besides, it draws parallels with Hanna Arendt's understanding of political freedom and argues that the complexity of her conception challenges the validity of Berlin's framework.

Keywords: freedom, liberty, positive and negative conceptions of freedom

INTRODUCTION

Needless to say, the definition of freedom has served a topic for a hefty debates in political thought[1]. The aim of the following essay is twofold. The first section examines the Machiavellian conception of liberty while resting its focus on his influential work *The Discourses on Livy*. The second section elaborates on the relevance of Machiavelli's conception of liberty in contemporary political philosophy and examines it through the prism of Isaiah Berlin's dualistic framework. Furthermore, the paper draws a comparison between Machiavelli's and Arendt's viewpoints. It elaborates on the main similarities and

differences between Arendt's conception of republican freedom and Machiavelli's *libertà*. By referring to Quentin Skinner, I will argue that Machiavelli's conception, albeit arguably in political terms, still is not straightforwardly positive and suggest that this constitutes one of the main differences between Arendt's and Machiavelli's understandings.

To begin with, significant controversies lurk behind Machiavelli's notion. Marcia L. Colish distinguishes between three main understandings of liberty (libertà): first, it is the understanding of liberty in a commonplace, which may entail freedom from physical capacity as freedom from political action enjoyed by the ruling force (Colish 1971, 324). Colish argues that liberty, in common sense, can also denote a person's financial position. Hence, in the reading of Colish, this understanding of Machiavellian freedom does not necessarily have to be political. As Colish maintains, free men are defined as the ones who act "on their own initiative, as opposed to those who act as other people's agents" and, therefore, "free-from" may constitute a synonym for "lacking in" or "enjoying the absence of" (Colish 1971, 325).

According to Colish, another understanding of freedom in Machiavelli is *free will*, which is conceived as an "attribute of human nature" (Colish 1971, 325). Colish argues that the notion of *free* refers to human independence. Machiavelli "upholds the dignity of man's free will" and suggests that a human being is capable to express his free will "in the face of *fortuna*" and "by the "exercise of Virtu" (Colish 1971, 326)2[2].

Finally, a purely political conception of liberty is referred as *Corporate Libertà*. According to this concept, cities are free when they are in possession of autonomy and are governed by their own laws instead of being subject to the rule of foreigners (Colish 1971 327). On the other hand, one should consider that in Machiavelli's political thought the distinction between political and individual freedoms might not be straightforward, but these two are intrinsically linked.

According to Samuel Salzborn, the main end of establishing a stable state, according to Machiavelli, is to secure individual freedom, which is not compatible with autocracy (Salzborn 2015, 29): "In Machiavelli's conception, 'the voice of the people' is likened to 'the voice of God', because he considers the people to be smarter, more reliable and of better judgment than its rulers" (Salzborn 2015, 29). Therefore, in Salzborn's reading, Machiavelli praises the people who founded republics for their virtue and their love of liberty.
Regarding the role of a people and its willingness to be free, the 16th chapter of *The Discourses on Livy* is particularly interesting. Machiavelli draws attention to the difficulty to maintain freedom for those people who have not acquired it by themselves. He further maintains that for a people who lived under the governance of a prince, the maintenance of freedom can present an insurmountable, yet a "reasonable difficulty" (Discourses 1.16, 44). He compares people who did not put any effort in the acquisition of freedom to a wild animal, which "although ferocious and feral nature has always been nourished in prison and in servitude" (Discourses 1.16, 44). One can argue that, for Machiavelli, it is the people who acquires and establishes its own freedom; however, for obtaining freedom, the joint action is required. In the same chapter, Machiavelli says:

> (…) the common utility that is drawn from a free way of life is not recognized by anyone while it is possessed: this is being able to enjoy one's things freely, without any suspicion, not fearing for the honour of wives and that of children, not to be afraid for oneself (Discourses 1.16, 45).

Skinner interprets this passage as freedom has the meaning of being unobscured in terms of whatever ends they choose to pursue themselves (Skinner 1984, 205). Upon this reasoning, freedom seems to be conceived in an individualist rather than in communal sense.

On the other hand, Machiavelli maintains that if corruption is ubiquitous in people's affairs, they will not be able to be exercise freedom. In this regard, his understanding of freedom is public, communal. There are two main desires that move people: "one, to

be avenged against those who are the cause that it is servile; the other, to recover its freedom" (Discourses 1.16, 46). As for to why people are willing to be free, the philosopher suggests that only a small part want freedom to command, whereas most of them desire to be free in order to lead secure lives (Discourses 1.16, 46).

Besides, in the Machiavellian thought, one of the meanings of freedom is political independence and self-governance[3]. Rome, according to him, had a free beginning, "without depending on anyone" (Discourses, 1.49.1, 100). It is abundantly clear that this understanding relates itself to the conception of sovereignty. As Maurizio Viroli rightly observes, Machiavelli's conception of liberty, which, in its sense, is republican, is beyond the scope of the rule of law and touches upon participation in a "sovereign deliberation", appointment of the magistrates, free expression in deliberative bodies and councils (Viroli 1998, 6). Viroli points out that a political man, for Machiavelli, commits himself to a political community, to a republic (Viroli 1998, 7). It can be argued, therefore, that the political conception of liberty is bound up with the notion of patriotism, love of the country, "which unites the citizens of a free republic" and "presupposes a sense of belonging and common-sense which only equal and free citizens can experience and cherish" (Viroli 1998, 150).

Furthermore, Machiavelli states that the foundation of freedom and the beginning of a new order requires extraordinary action. One needs to go for the extraordinary means, "such as violence and arms" in order to acquire or maintain freedom (Discourses, 1.18, 4). One example is the murder of Romulus by Remus, which, in the case of Rome, would be a precondition for the acquisition of freedom (Discourses, 1.8).

However, this example generates controversy. As the title of Machiavelli's *Ninth Discourse* goes, "it is necessary to be alone if one wishes to order a republic anew or to perform it altogether outside its ancient orders". This line of thought seems to be controversial, given the importance of Machiavelli bestows upon people's action to establish freedom. This argument challenges Viroli's account,

too. Mansfield and Tarcov, interpret "being alone" as "the necessity of any ordering to depend on a single mind" (Mansfield and Tarcov 1996, 23). Therefore, 'being alone' can be translated into a 'unanimity', which people can jointly achieve.

For the acquisition of freedom, the notion of the beginning is crucial. In this regard, Machiavelli develops quite a deterministic approach. He holds that whereas drafting freedom-supporting laws is difficult for a state with free beginnings, the ones with servile beginnings will be unable to govern themselves with just and freedom sustaining law (1.49,100). Machiavelli provides the example of Rome, which had a free beginning but had difficulties to maintain it, whereas Florence and Venice, the beginnings of which were servile, "were never able to reorder themselves" (Discourses, 1.49, 101). Machiavelli holds that, for Rome, whilst it was corrupt, making new laws was necessary in order to acquire freedom and establish new orders, which would be completely different from the former ones (Discourses, 1.18, 51). He conceives two options in terms of how the new order can be established: one envisages a sudden transition from one order to another; the other is a gradual transition that entails universal recognition of new laws.

Another important topic is addressed through the separation of plebs and the aristocracy. Machiavelli suggests that the disunion of plebs and the senate made the Republic of Rome free and powerful. He draws a sharp distinction between them and suggests that the laws "in favour of freedom "are set by the disunion of the two "(Discourses, 1.4, 16). He maintains that the republican constitution founded primarily on the power of the people did not last long (Gatti 2015, 15). Moreover, freedom calls for tumults and conflicts. In Machiavelli's words: "every city ought to have its modes with which the people can vent its ambition" (Discourses, 1.5, 17).

Machiavelli and the Contemporary Debates on the Conception of Liberty

Isaiah Berlin's dualistic framework

As Adam Swift rightly points out, Isaiah Berlin's essay on the two concepts of liberty in which the famous distinction between positive and negative conceptions is drawn is the most influential one in contemporary political philosophy (Swift 2014, 57). According to Berlin, "the positive sense of the word 'liberty' derives from the wish on the part of the individual to be his own master", to be a "subject", instead of being an "object" (Berlin 2002, 178). The main question referring to the positive conception of freedom is: "What, or who, is the source of control or interference that can determine someone to do, or be, this rather than that?" (Berlin 2002, 169). In contrast, he suggests that freedom, in a negative sense, is all about "the area within which a man can act unobstructed by others. If I am prevented by others from doing what I could otherwise do, I am to that degree unfree" (Berlin 2002, 169). Respectively, the question that addresses negative freedom is: "what is the area within which the subject (…) is or should be left to do or be what he is able to do or be, without interference by other persons?" (Berlin 2002, 169). To put it simply, negative freedom ("freedom from") requires an absence of certain types of constraints and interferences, whereas positive freedom ("freedom to") calls for action, thus for the fulfilment of certain activities.

Skinner questions the applicability of this distinction. In his eyes, people value freedom as long as they are free from the interferences, which would hamper their security[4]. In other words, people value freedom inasmuch as they value their secure lives (Skinner 1984, 205). Upon Machiavelli's reasoning, a free city is capable to govern itself and is not subject to any constraints. Considering these two accounts, Skinner concludes that, for Machiavelli, the enjoyment of personal freedom is a possibility that is given only to the members of self-governing communities. These are political communities in

which "the body politic determines its own actions, the actions of community as a whole" (Skinner 1984, 207). From this perspective, the positive and negative conceptions of freedom seem to be compatible and complementary.

Hanna Arendt and the Notions "Beginning" and "Freedom"

Another author whose works draw on this topic is Hannah Arendt. In her essay "What is freedom?", she points out that raising the question about a definition of freedom represents a "hopeless enterprise", given all the controversies and contradictions which are bound with this concept (Arendt 1977, 143). She acknowledges, however, that discussions on freedom are inevitable in political theory (Arendt 1977, 145). As previously stated, Arendt's endorses the political conception of freedom. In her book "On Revolution", freedom and power are conceived as inextricably interrelated concepts; they are almost applied as synonyms. People, upon Arendt's reasoning, are capable to act, to establish a new order and the power cannot exist separately from them. It only exists when people get together and "bind themselves through 'promises, covenants, and mutual pledges' (Arendt 1990, 181). Needless to say that mutual pledges and promises are political categories.

For Arendt, as well as for Machiavelli, the concept of beginning is crucial. She endorses the idea that a human being is the beginning itself: "with the creation of man, the principle of beginning came into the world itself, which, of course, is only another way of saying that the principle of freedom was created when man was created but not before" (Arendt 1990, 177) Freedom, on its side, is all about action, it is "primarily experienced in action"(Arendt 1997, 151).

It should be clear now that Arendt dismisses the negative conception and the rise of negative liberties. She maintains that this idea, as well as that of limited government, were some of the most potent reasons because of which the American Revolution could not entirely fulfil its initial goals (Arendt 1990, 144). This is action,

through which "something new comes into the world" (Arendt, 1990, 166).

Both Machiavelli and Arendt seem to have a deterministic approach in this regards. Thus, Machiavelli holds that, for a corrupt people, reacquisition of freedom is almost impossible. In Arendt's reading, the American people already constituted a politically and legally organized entity before the revolution, unlike the French one, which resulted in the success of the American Revolution and the failure of its French counterpart. Whereas the inheritance of the French one was absolutism, the Americans, in Arendt's words, "had widespread experience in self-government" (Arendt 1990, 157).

Another obvious similarity is the importance that both philosophers bestow upon the beginning and "going extraordinary". However, in sharp contrast with Machiavelli, who justifies the usage of violent means, one can see the total negation of violence in Arendt's work. She perceives violence as a "marginal phenomenon in the political realm", which is unable to create the order of political freedom (Arendt 1990, 19).

The seat of power is another important topic. Machiavelli, as we already saw, holds that the republican constitution founded only on the power of people could not last long. In a similar vein, Arendt states that the Americans distinguished the source of power, on the one hand, and the source of law, on the other. This was another reason for American success. In the case of the French Revolution, power and law were believed to have the selfsame source, *i.e.* the people (Arendt 1990, 183). She contends that this understanding was fatal to the French Revolution (Arendt 1990, 156).

I assume, notwithstanding, that the biggest difference between Arendt and Machiavelli is that the first dismisses negative liberties and the negative conception of freedom as such.

On the other hand, one cannot place Machiavelli's understanding within Berlin's categorization of negative and positive liberties. As Skinner rightly argues, the negative and positive conceptions of freedom are complementary in Machiavelli's political thought. Arendt, on the other hand, explicitly endorses republican, "safely

buried" concept of freedom, (Arendt, 1990, 11) which calls for joint action. Besides, she dismisses the rise of negative liberties and liberal reading of freedom as forbearance and absence of constraints. She maintains that the "negative safeguards", which are intended to limit the government's encroachment, can by no means open "the political realm" (Arendt 1990, 69).

Nevertheless, Arendt herself acknowledges that the founding fathers bestowed great importance upon the negative liberties and agrees with the necessity of a limited government (Arendt 1990, 147)[5]. Although for her, this undoubtedly was a mistake from the side of Americans revolutionaries, one can argue that, in the American case, positive and negative freedoms were complementary and not sharply distinguished. On the one hand, the new political realm was created through the action and the exercise of power. On the other one, this, to a large extent, served the possibility of particular individuals to live in freedom and lead "secure" lives in the newly established Body Politic.

The purpose of this paper was to discuss the Machiavellian conception of freedom and its relevance for contemporary debates in political philosophy by emphasising Berlin's famous distinction and Arendt's particular idea of political freedom. This essay can by no means be held as exhaustive. However, the Machiavellian conception shows that a radical distinction between the positive and negative conceptions of freedom does not seem to be *prima facie* evident. Even if one accepts it, their incompatibility and rivalry in political communities are questionable.

NOTES

1. The difference between the notions of freedom and liberty is a vast subject. However, it is beyond the scope of this essay, therefore, these terms are used interchangeably in the paper.
2. *Virtu* and *Fortuna* are two key words in Machiavelli's philosophy. *Virtù*, even though often translated in English as *virtue*, actually refers to the range of personal qualities that the prince will find it necessary to acquire in order to "maintain his state" and to "achieve great things". *Fortuna* links *virtù* with the

effective exercise of power. *Fortuna*, in the sense used by Machiavelli, is a malevolent force, the "operational principles" of which the success of political processes depends (Nederman 2015). According to Skinner, in the fifteenth century political thought, this was exactly the idea *fortune*, as "an inexorable force", which threatened one's freedom (Skinner 1981, 27).

3. The concept of *beginning*, which will be elaborated in the second section of the essay, is crucial in Hannah Arendt's philosophy.
4. Skinner himself cites Machiavelli's words: "Desiderano la libertà per vivere sicuri" (Skinner 1984, 205).
5. Arendt refers to Federalist 51, in which Madison argues that the government is a "reflection upon human nature".
6. Atmosphere: In the fiction following the Romantic grotesque period, "atmosphere" is used in the sense of setting in order to get a particular effect similar to gothic fiction.

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